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In conversation with Rachel Lofthouse

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How and why did you become interested in practitioner learning?

That is such an interesting question, and one that bears some reflection. I guess I fell into being a practitioner learner, before I became aware that I was, or that it would hold my interest. In 1990 I took my PGCE at Newcastle University, starting my journey like many others in a time before QTS. A lasting memory of my PGCE is my tutor (now Professor David Leat) arriving at a school with a spiral notebook to observe my lessons and asking afterwards if I'd like the notes ripped out for their later reference. I have a folder in my attic with these and other artefacts from my PGCE and there are no tracking documents, no standards referenced reports and no action plans. I do however also have very strong memories of discussing teaching (at micro and macro levels) in some detail with David and during long PGCE days with my fellow students. Some of my most lasting memories of learning to teach during my PGCE include those associated with collaboration with my tutors, mentors, peers and school colleagues. This was an important foundation of practitioner learning.

These types of opportunities carried on as CPD once I had qualified and gained employment. During my nine years employed as a secondary teacher and head of department I was lucky that I could contribute to two networks of teachers who were developing effective approaches to teaching thinking skills. One of these was Newcastle University's Thinking Through Geography group, and the other was Northumberland Local Authority Humanities Thinking Skills Network. Both brought teachers together with the explicit ambitions of developing our knowledge and expertise through co-planning and shared trialling of subject-based thinking skills lessons, reviewing and writing about our experiences. The sessions were facilitated by local authority advisors and university tutors but over time the expertise of the participants in the networks grew, aided by the fact that the networks each ran for

several years. At the heart of both networks was practitioner learning which was both informed by and shaping my teaching over time. The networks offered us all a chance to shape our future pedagogic practices and support others in our own schools and beyond.

At the same time as engaging with these networks I was acting as both a mentor to student teachers and as coach to colleagues (through a TDA Schools-based Research Consortium project). I have always viewed a key aspect of both coaching and mentoring as the creation of opportunities for practitioner learning, and an acknowledgment that both individuals in the relationships will learn from and for practice. This early experience of mentoring and coaching was more formative than I could possibly have imagined at the time (perhaps that is typical of practitioner learning).

I didn't take any more formal qualifications until I eventually gained my PhD by publication 15 years after becoming a teacher educator at Newcastle University. In academic terms that looks like quite a gap on my CV, but that didn't stop me learning. I believe that knowledge can be generated through participation and reflection, and that practitioner learning (for example through systematic professional enquiry) can be used to investigate and learn from our own and other's practices. Indeed, the only authentic way that I could describe my own research journey, through my collaborations with colleagues, through publication, and through a synthesis of these as a doctoral statement is as 'practitioner enquiry'.

What are you currently working on and how does your work talk to what you see as the burning issues?

My current role is at Leeds Beckett University, where I have been fortunate enough to establish a new research and practice centre, *CollectivED; the mentoring and coaching hub* (see that legacy from my days as a teacher). When the expectation to set up a new research centre was first mooted I immediately responded that I

needed to add the concept of 'practice' on an equal footing to research. In doing so we broke the mould of our established university centres, but it was essential in my view. Just over a year on CollectivED is a thriving hub, with regional and national events, a substantial national and international publication record through our working papers, international study visits, a national research network, contributions to academic and professional conferences in both the UK and abroad, a flourishing twitter community, school-based enquiry groups and CPD. Underpinning these are two key commitments. Firstly, to engage in research and practice development at many scales and with diverse partners, and secondly to remain determined to bring research and practice into the same physical and dialogic spaces.

This work matters to me. My field is education, but I think that there are parallels in social work, nursing and other public service professions. We are facing a significant crisis in teacher recruitment, retention and wellbeing in the UK. We have policy announcements coming thick and fast to address these, but also a catalogue of past policy implementations that have only scratched the surface. In my view it is not good enough to atomise, diagnose and treat the indicators of the problem (e.g. to know that a significant number of teachers leave before they have taught for 5 years, and so decide to pay some teachers in some subjects a bonus in their fifth year, in an attempt to retain them). We need to think harder, deeper and with more insight and ambition if we are to solve this. I think building a robust and dynamic culture of teacher coaching, mentoring and other forms of collaborative practice on the ground can play a part. This is at least in part because it puts practitioners front and centre, it encourages them to lean in towards each other and reach out to their wider profession. It helps to engage this in the problems of practice, to build resilience and hopefulness. Cultures of coaching and mentoring allow for divergent thinking, problem-solving and capacity building. The teachers as practitioners have a chance to keep learning.

What for you are the current ‘burning issues’ in practitioner learning?

This depends on how we define ‘practitioner learning’, which itself is not straight forward. So, I am going to take an easy way out and focus on ‘practice’, and the why we need to better at conceptualising it as the burning issue. When I think about practices I consider them to be actions which sustain human activities, conducted by individuals and groups as a response to evolving contexts and situations. Our practices (noun) are influenced by our individual values and beliefs, our decisions, experience and expertise. They are dynamic actions which embody language, relationships and physicality. Practices can stagnate, but they can also be altered through practising (verb), allowing them to be understood and refined with intent. If we use these ideas as the basis of our consideration of practitioner learning then we can see the need for practitioner learning to allow us to wrestle with complexity, connect us to our own emotions as well as those of others, take account of our personal professional histories and our future journeys, be rooted in the authenticity of our specific contexts and how these are inextricably linked to wider systems and provide us with formative feedback loops, help us to find our voices, give us platforms to speak with confidence from and connect us to networks that challenge us and feed our souls. The “burning issue” for me is that we risk constraining practitioner learning because we do not fully appreciate the characteristics of practice.

What research paradigms/methods/designs do you prefer to work with and why?

My research is undertaken from the perspective of a teacher educator about teacher learning. In terms of methodology much of my research to date can be conceptualized as small-scale, mixed methods and related to cases of practice. The cases of practice therefore fall into two broad categories. Some are cases of practice development over which I had significant influence in my practitioner role, while

others are cases of practices in which I had significant interest because of their role in professional learning.

When writing my doctoral statement to go alongside the publications submitted for PhD, I carefully crafted sentences which took hold of the hard concepts of ontology and epistemology, concepts which I (like many practitioner learners) are often shy of using. I had to retrospectively make sense of my research paradigm, and I summarised as follows;

My ontological conviction is that through my participation in, and informed reflection on, my work I can learn how teachers learn, and how they can be supported to learn. I must therefore pay due regard to the actions I take, the decisions they rest on, and the outcomes of both. In doing so I am developing my epistemology; believing that my knowledge-base can be extended as a result of establishing questions that emerge in practice and which reflect my values, and which can be pursued through systematic enquiry.

What's next for you?

Having set up CollectivED one challenge is to ensure that the pressure to be financially sound as a university centre does not undermine our core ethic of bringing practitioners and researchers (not just research and practice) into the same space. This is much more possible now than it would have been a few years ago because of social media, and what this has highlighted is the genuine curiosity about enabling practitioner learning which is up to meeting the very real problems of practice.

In teacher education we face a new policy upheaval brought on by the recently published Early Career Framework which will inevitably have an upstream impact on Initial Teacher Education. The outline framework does offer a model of professional development that seems logical and takes into consideration a curriculum for

teachers' early career development as well as indicating an intention to increase mentoring for teachers in the first two years in post. However, I have some real concerns about the framework, and in voicing them I am already in a position of dissonance with others in my field and policy-makers. So, one of my 'next' priorities is to use this as productive dissonance, to continue to use my understanding of that practitioner 'learning' to engage productively as this framework becomes reality, and to remain hopeful that communities of practitioners and researchers (who are often the same people) can join forces to make sure that turning these policies into practice creates a powerful educated profession for the future. We need to know how we can create contemporary learning experiences in which our teachers at all career stages will experience solidarity with each other and with their learners, will be given permission to be productively creative and do so in a safe space in which each of them can become the best teacher they can be.

What advice would you give to new researchers in the field of practitioner learning?

Slow down, breathe and practise. As educators engaged in practitioner learning we need to deliberately slow down, locate ourselves in our practice and policy landscapes and become confident that our voices matter. It makes such a difference if you can join a community in which you will be supported and challenged.

If you could change one thing about practitioner education it would be....

This feels like more than 'one thing', but I see it as a philosophical 'whole'. My concern is that teachers' professional lives are a series of missed opportunities to effect the changes our society demands, and of misalignment between our optimism for the power of education and the realities of the job. Social media, while connecting people, also allows some perspectives to dominate and we have a proliferation of books written by practitioners. I see these as valuable but also note that they run the risk of being monologic and somewhat didactic. I would like to

ensure that instead of being compliant to, or reinforcing common educational cultures underpinned by a degree of suspicion, surveillance or blame, practitioners can engage in practitioner learning in more divergent and collaborative ways. I would hope that we can create supported experiences allowing teachers as professionals to work and learn in ways that are authentic and take account of the realities of their contexts. I am not sure we need 'gurus', because that suggests that the power has been stripped out of the collective.

We need to build bridges across the boundaries of our complex practices. Unless we, as professionals take care with our own learning and development, our most vulnerable children and young people in society will remain at risk of being isolated and disadvantaged by education, our teachers will not find the means to continue to evolve, and our educational institutions will stagnate. Teachers and the wider educational community can change this if we engage in more inclusive professional learning practices based on participation and dialogue and enter spaces in which co-construction is possible. My research leads me to conclude that we need to re-think approaches to professional development through collaborative and authentic learning activities which create and sustain opportunities for professional learning at all career stages.